

The Divine Language

(1) Knowledge of Other Finite Spirits/Knowledge of God

According to Berkeley our knowledge of God is actually more certain than our knowledge of other minds, since we have an infallible demonstration for God's existence but only a probable argument in favor of finite minds.

Yet there is a sense in which Berkeley thinks that our knowledge of God is very much like our knowledge of other finite spirits. For Berkeley, we do not immediately perceive human beings. Rather, we see their bodies which are like a kind of visual badge. But the body appears to indicate a kind of rationality (i.e. various behaviors are performed through the visual body, etc. which indicate a rational spirit). Because of this, we infer the existence of other finite spirits based upon the evidence. Similarly, based upon the rationality we observe in the overall working of nature (its regularity, uniformity, purposefulness, etc.) we infer the existence of a much greater mind (i.e. God).

In *Alciphron*, Euphranor offers this type of argument to Alciphron. However Alciphron thinks that this apparent evidence of Divine rationality is insufficient. He requires that God actually speak to us (just as finite spirits discourse with one another). Thus, we come to Berkeley's notion of a Divine Language.

(2) The Divine Language

Begin by noticing that in Berkeley's view, there is a kind of problem. He has denied that fire causes heat, that water is the cause of coolness. But we regularly experience these sensible things together. Why? For Berkeley, the visible idea of fire is the sign of the tangible heat; the audible sound of an engine is the sign of a visible motorcycle. So instead of being related by *causation*, the sensible things are related by *signification*. Berkeley thinks that God uses these signs to communicate to us (to help regulate our conduct). Thus the visible idea of a fire let's me know not to move my hand in a certain way (or else I will feel intense burning pain).

Berkeley allows for *mediate* perception, in addition to *immediate* perception. Thus, while we may immediately perceive some visible idea, that visible idea may also *suggest* a tangible idea to our imagination. In this way, we may be said to *mediately perceive* the tangible heat through immediately perceiving the visible idea (which is like a sign). Similarly, while you immediately hear the sound "money", that sound suggests the visible idea of cash to your imagination.

"Suggestion" depends upon experience. It is only by constantly associating various ideas, that one idea can suggest another one. Thus, it is like learning what words mean over time, through trial and error.

For Berkeley there are various different kinds of signs in nature (i.e. sounds can indicate visible and tangible ideas, so can smells indicate visible ideas, etc.). However, while God communicates to us through all of those signs, the Divine Language specifically concerns the fact that visible ideas communicate or suggest tangible ideas. For Berkeley, this relation of signification is so detailed, elaborate, complex, and uniform, that it seems like a genuine language (of the type that has a grammar, etc.).

In order to understand Berkeley's Theory of Vision, begin by recognizing that, for Berkeley, we never *immediately perceive distance by sight*. While it does *seem that we perceive objects at a distance*, this is actually a case of *mediate perception by sight*.

Generally, things look far away when they appear to be very small (contrast how a car looks when it is parked in front of you and how it looks from an airplane). But in this case, we don't actually see distance. We see visual objects of various different visible sizes. (Also, objects far away may visually appear *faint*, while objects close up may appear *blurry*).

According to Berkeley, we have frequently associated ideas of contrasting visible size, faintness, blurriness, etc. with tangible ideas of distance (i.e. ideas of moving one's body from here to there). Because of this, visible ideas can *suggest* tangible ideas of distance to us. Thus we only *mediately perceive* distance by sight.

But also notice that there is a difference between how big objects appear by sight and how big they actually are. (From an airplane your thumb and a car might visually look the same size). Consequently, visible extension is actually not very useful. However we also take ourselves to *see* the actual size of an object (i.e. see how small the object is, etc.). However, again this is a case of *mediate perception*. For we associate various visible ideas with tangible ideas of extension (i.e. ideas of how big a tangible would feel, upon touching it, etc.). And these visible ideas *suggest* the tangible ideas to us.

Indeed, even *visible situation* (up, down, left, right, etc.) stands in contrast to *tangible situation*. Once again, it is only through associating the two different kinds of ideas that visible ideas come to *suggest* tangible ones.

Berkeley argues that given the arbitrary nature of association between visible ideas and tangible ideas, and the fact that it is also purposeful, that this is a case of language. For Berkeley, this is a highly complex way in which God communicates with us. The visible ideas are signs which suggest tangible ideas. Notice, that for Berkeley this language is one which is designed to govern and regulate our behavior. (Just as traffic signs regulate our driving).

